

## Lesson 11: Precedent of Abraham, part 2

### Romans 4:9-25

*Concept #1: Covenant requirements follow covenant acceptance.*

<sup>9</sup> Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS RECKONED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." <sup>10</sup> How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised?

Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; <sup>11</sup> and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them, <sup>12</sup> and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.

*Concept #2: God's promise is secured by God's grace.*

<sup>13</sup> For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.

<sup>14</sup> For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; <sup>15</sup> for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation. <sup>16</sup> For this reason *it is* by faith, in order that *it may be* in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, <sup>17</sup> (as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, *even* God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.

*Concept #3: Faith is the assurance that God will perform what he has promised.*

<sup>18</sup> In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE."

<sup>19</sup> Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; <sup>20</sup> yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, <sup>21</sup> and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.

*Concept #4: The promise to Abraham set the precedent for the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

<sup>22</sup> Therefore IT WAS ALSO RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. <sup>23</sup> Now not for his sake only was it written that it was reckoned to him, <sup>24</sup> but for our sake also, to whom it will be reckoned, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, <sup>25</sup> He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

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### The Law is fulfilled by the principle of faith

After declaring the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that believers are declared righteous by grace through faith, Paul faced an objection to that good news. In Romans 3:31, "Do we then nullify the law through faith?" Paul, says, "No way! By no means! Instead we establish the law or fulfill the law by faith. Paul then goes on to explain by offering up Abraham as a precedent for his gospel of faith. We looked at Abraham as precedent in our last lesson and are going to finish up in this lesson. We are going to finish up with Romans chapter 4.

To get started in this lesson, let's think about what it means that the law is fulfilled by faith. There are two different contexts in which it can be said that the law is fulfilled by faith. How the law is fulfilled by faith depends on which context we are in, which question of covenant are we talking about. Are we talking about what makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God? Well then, faith fulfills law in a special way for that question, "What makes me acceptable?". Or are we talking about the second question of covenant, "How do I please my God with whom I am already in relationship?"

Faith still fulfills law for that question but in a different way for this question. We need to keep those questions straight, so we do not confuse the answers.

*The Law fulfilled by faith in the first question of covenant*

In Romans 4 we are still talking about the first question of covenant. What makes me acceptable to be in covenant relationship with a holy God. And what we find with Abraham is the same thing we find with Jesus. The same way we answer, "What makes me acceptable?" is not changed in the gospel. What's new is new is that we now see how it works. God made a promise. He signed for a debt, but that debt remained unpaid. Old Covenant believers trusted that God would follow through with his promise to clear the debt.

God made this promise to Abraham in Genesis 12. How could he know it would be fulfilled? What is the weak link in the promise? God or Abraham? Abraham is the weak link. How could Abraham know that the promise would be fulfilled if he could not know whether or not he would keep his part? God had something radical to communicate to Abraham. God was going to communicate to Abraham that the keeping of this covenant is not dependent on you. And to make this clear, God used a known form of communication. It was this idea of a suzerain-vassal treaty or a treaty that a great king makes with a lesser king. The vassal makes a covenant with his greater king through a sacrifice. That is the oath. He cuts covenant. In doing so, he calls a curse on himself, "If I break covenant with you great king, let it be done to me what was done to these sacrificial animals." That's the ceremony God set up with Abraham in Genesis 15. When he was told to cut the animals in half, everyone reading that culturally knew what was going on. We are setting up a covenant treaty. God sets up the known to communicate radical good news. Rather than allow Abraham to follow through with the oath of covenant, God put Abraham into a deep sleep and God himself performed the covenant oath. God passed through as fire and smoke. God passed through the sacrificial animals effectively saying, "If you break covenant with me Abraham, then let me die!" Amazing grace how sweet the sound! "You don't know how you can keep covenant with me? You don't have to keep covenant. You have to believe me to keep covenant."

The promised blessing of provision and protection and purpose can be fulfilled because God willing assumed the debt of covenant unfaithfulness. In the day of Christ Jesus, God called for payment of the debt, and then he himself paid that debt.

Thus, the first question of covenant, "What makes me acceptable, how can I be recognized as righteous?", that question is answered for us in the exact same way it was answered for Abraham: by grace through faith. And that is how faith fulfills the covenant law in regards to the first question of covenant. What does it mean to say that faith fulfills or faith establishes the law? The law demands justice. Death must be paid for the wages of sin is death. The law demands this. The righteous requirement of the law is established or fulfilled when we place our faith in Jesus.

*The Law fulfilled by faith in the second question of covenant*

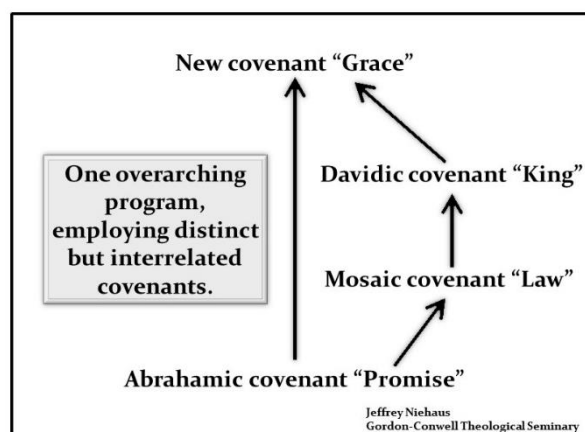
But we have not addressed the second question of covenant, yet. The second question of covenant asks, "How then shall we live?" What is the role of Old Covenant Law in answering that question? The Mosaic Law does not have a primary role in answering that question. It will still have much to teach us. But we do not please God by obedience to the Mosaic Law. That's not our covenant. That was true of Old Covenant believers. When they asked, "How do we then please our God?", they looked to Mosaic Law to get instruction from God for how they ought to live. But when Jesus came, Jesus was the mediator of a new covenant. The writer of Hebrews calls it a better covenant. We are under a new and better covenant. So, if I want to know, "How am I to live for my God? How am I to please my God?", I am looking to the New Covenant for my instructions.

*The Language of Covenant – Promise, Law and Grace*

I need to clarify some language that may be confusing. I have used the language of law when talking about the two questions of covenant as synonymous with commandment or stipulation or good works. I have used it basically to refer to the dos and don'ts of covenant relationship. In that sense

there is law in the Old Covenant. There are lots of do's and don'ts. And there is law in the New Covenant. There are lots of do's and don'ts in the New Covenant. That is a valid way to use the term. But Paul uses law in the next several chapters almost exclusively to refer to whole Mosaic covenant. And he uses the term grace to refer to our new covenant reality. So, I want to fit my language with Paul. So, from now on, unless I say differently, I am going to use Law to refer to the Mosaic covenant, and Grace to refer to the New Covenant and, following Paul's language here in chapter 4, we will use Promise to refer to the Abrahamic covenant. I will use the words commandment or stipulation or requirement to refer to the specific dos and don'ts of the covenant. The do's and don'ts of the Promise. The do's and don'ts of the Law. And the do's and don'ts of Grace.

My basic understanding of the relationship between the covenants is that the covenant of Promise made to Abraham established for us the answer to "How do I become acceptable to God." We are reckoned righteous by grace through faith, whether we are in Abraham's family under the covenant of Promise, whether we are an Israelite with Moses under the covenant of Law or whether we are a New Testament believer under the covenant of Grace. All of those covenants have the same problem, as Paul said in 3:21, "by the law no flesh is justified." No covenant can give us a list of stipulations or requirements that we can live out and so be justified by God. It's not the problem of the covenant. It is the problem of our flesh. We are going to break covenant. So, grace is the only way to answer this question for human beings. So, even though we are going to call the New Covenant "Grace", using Paul's language as we go forward, grace is foundational to all of the covenants.



The Promise established the answer to the first question of covenant. Then when God called forth the nation of Israel from Egypt, he brought them to Mount Sinai and gave them what was for them a new covenant. The covenant of Moses was new at the time. God answered for them how to live out the relationship of grace established by the promise. They were saved by grace through faith just like Abraham. But then they were asking the question, "How do we live this out as a people, as a nation?" They should live it out according to the Mosaic Covenant of Law.

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A new mediator of a new covenant has come for us. And Jesus has established something new for us. The first question of the covenant is the same. We are saved by grace through faith. But when we are thinking the next question, "How then do we live for our God?", we have something new. The foundation is still the Promise. We are still saved by grace through faith. That promise is still fulfilled in Jesus. But the Mosaic Law has fulfilled its purpose in answering the second question of covenant. The Mosaic Law's purpose was for the nation of Israel as the people of God. The New Covenant of Grace has now taken that role for us, for believers who are under this new covenant. "How do I please my Lord?" Not by following the Old Covenant design for life. That would be trying to put new wine back in and old wineskin. We are not trying to live out New Covenant through the wineskin of the Old Covenant. We please God, not by seeking to live according to their covenant, but by seeking to live according to our covenant. This is where Paul is going in chapters 5-8. "What's new about our new covenant in relation to the second question, how then shall we live?" If it really is a new wine skin, then we are really are going to have to pay close attention to what's radically different, what's new about the new covenant in answering the question, "How ought we live?"

We are almost done with the first question of covenant. We are establishing the precedent of Abraham. And during the rest of Romans chapter 4, Paul has four concepts for us to finish drawing out, to understand of the covenant of Promise and how that helps us to understand the covenant of

grace. These concepts are going to help us to finish up the precedent, to finish up the first question of covenant, “What makes me acceptable?”, so that we can really dig in in the next four chapters into this question, “How then ought we live?”

Rather than go through verse by verse the rest of chapter four, it is quite long, I want to cover a concept at a time. These are the four concepts I see Paul drawing out of the life of Abraham.

Concept #1: Covenant requirements follow after covenant acceptance.

Concept #2: God’s promise depends on God’s grace.

Concept #3: Faith is the belief that God will perform what God has promised.

Concept #4: The promise to Abraham set the precedent for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That is just a summing up of what we have already seen in that fourth concept. Let’s start with the first concept. We are going to need to read chapter 4:9-12.

**Concept #1: Covenant requirements follow covenant acceptance (4:9-12).**

[Read Romans 4:9-12]

Okay. That might be confusing. It feels confusing when I read it out loud. But when we go through it slowly, there is really a basic point that is being made here. Covenant requirements follow covenant acceptance. Let’s remind ourselves of the story.

Genesis 12-25 tells the story of Abraham’s life. Well, it does not really tell us the story of Abraham’s life. It is only 13 chapters after all. It is frustratingly short. I would love to know more about the story of Abraham’s life. And we start the story when Abraham is already 75 years old. Better to say that Genesis 12-25 gives us significant moments out of Abraham’s life. God was doing something new with Abraham. He shifted from covenant with all people, in Adam and Noah our covenant was all humanity, then at the tower of Babel we come up on a divide and conquer strategy. God has broken all the people out into many nations and cultures. And he is going to reach all of them through one. He made a special covenant with one people, they are not even yet a people, to bless all nations. The glimpses we get of Abraham’s life show a story of struggle, a story of faith, and a story of covenant. We are going to note four critical moments of covenant. We talked about these in the last lesson. There is covenant promise, covenant ceremony, covenant sign and covenant test. And these four show up in Genesis 12, Genesis 15, Genesis 17, and Genesis 22.

In the last lesson we really focused on the covenant of promise moment in Genesis 12 and the covenant ceremony moment in Genesis 15. That promise came in Genesis 12, the ceremony did not come for another 10 years, when God actually cut the covenant with Abraham and reaffirmed the promise that he initially gave Abraham up in the land of Ur. And in the cutting of covenant he established that this promise is going to be fulfilled by grace. You receive it by faith. It is not fulfilled by your ability to keep it. So, God took the covenant curse on himself while Abraham was passive. Abraham slept.

Paul points out in this little bit confusing passage that I just read the idea that the covenant sign came much later after the covenant was cut. From promise to covenant ceremony we had 10 years. But from covenant ceremony to covenant sign, we have had another 13 years. Ishmael was not even an idea in Abraham’s mind in Genesis 15. Well, there was the hope of a son, but not the way they were going to get Ishmael, because he had to be 13 before he gets circumcised. But it’s good news for us. Paul’s point is that there is clear separation between first question of covenant and second question of covenant. Abraham was declared righteous by grace through faith in Genesis 15 long before God communicated any specific requirements to live out that covenant. He may have communicated them to Abraham. I assume Abraham knew some idea of how God wanted him to live it out. But in the story that we have received in Genesis, there is an intentional delay in giving us any of those stipulations. There is no question about whether circumcision was necessary or not. That gets confused later by Jews for whom circumcision has become so important. But Paul is saying, “Go

back to the original story. Go look at Abraham.” Abraham knew he was accepted 13 years before God even told him about circumcision. Circumcision is not necessary. It is the same problem some people have today thinking that baptism is necessary for salvation. No. It is a beautiful sign of something that has to happen spiritually. It is a sign of the faith that we do have in Jesus. But it is attributing much more to the sign than God ever intended if you think that the ritual somehow saves.

By waiting 13 years, God made it very clear that Abraham’s acceptance is based on his faith. Abraham is accepted by grace through faith. Paul’s pointing this out to the Jews of his day. “As much importance as you guys might want to attach to the symbolic ceremony of circumcision, you can’t argue from Genesis that that is what made Abraham acceptable.” There is too big of a gap between Genesis 15 and Genesis 17.

It was a powerful symbol. Like with all cutting of covenants, this is a special cutting that each family that has a baby boy performs. It is the calling of a curse on oneself. “If we, as a family, turn away from the worship of Yahweh, then let our family, our seed, be cut off from the tribes of Abraham.” That is what circumcision communicates. It is a literal cutting of covenant and it is the calling of a curse, like walking through the animals, but this curse is, “Let our seed be cut off if we become a family rejects Yahweh. If we become worshippers of pagan gods cut us off from the nations.” That is what we are doing with circumcision.

Moses also picked up, with the negative symbol, the calling of curse, there is also a blessing inherent in the idea of circumcision. Moses talks about this in Deuteronomy 30. This recognition that what we need is for God to circumcise our hearts. This outward sign needs to be a symbol of something that happens to us inwardly. If we are really going to love God with all our heart and all our mind and all our soul, we need God to cut sin away from our inner being and to bring forth new birth or some kind of spiritual fruit.

Circumcision was a powerful covenant sign, both in the idea of calling curse, but also in the idea of expressing blessing. But it is not necessary for salvation. It is not necessary for acceptance. And this is what Paul is pointing out when he writes that this is something Abraham received, “Not while circumcised but while uncircumcised.” And he later received the sign of circumcision, but that was a sign of the faith he already had while he was uncircumcised.

God adds circumcision as a covenant stipulation, and it goes with the promise. And much later it would be taken up in the Law, the covenant of Law. And it belongs to the second question of covenant. “Now that we are accepted by faith, how should we live out our covenant with you O Lord? How do we please you?” Genesis 17 is giving part of that answer. God is saying, “You know what, this is what I want you to do. I want you to circumcise all of your boys as a sign of the covenant relationship we have established by grace through faith.” And if God chooses to change the requirements of his covenant, he is free to do that. If he wants to give Moses covenant stipulations that include circumcision, then great! And that is what he did. Circumcision was part of the covenant with Abraham, that was an expected stipulation. And then it carried right on over into the covenant of Law and the Israelites were expected to continue. So, believers under the old covenant who want to know how to live for God, they know that this is one of the things they ought to do. They should circumcise their boys. That shows that they have a heart to obey God, a heart to please God. Hopefully, they get the symbolism of what they are doing. But if God decides not to include the stipulation of circumcision as part of a new covenant like the new covenant he made with Jesus, then great! You know those of us under the new covenant, we are asking the same question, “What do you want us to do God? How do we live for you?” And part of God’s answer for us is, “You know what, don’t be circumcised. That’s not your covenant. You be baptized! That is the covenant sign I want you all to perform under this new covenant. This is a new wineskin. So, we need to make some changes. And we are going to make some of our changes in ritual. It’s great that they were circumcised, but you be baptized.”

Paul, taking us back to Abraham, he is showing us that it is not the covenant stipulations that are essential for entering into relationship with God. Circumcision is not essential. Baptism is not essential. What is essential is God's grace received by faith. So, whether we are talking about a Jew who feels like he still ought to be circumcising his baby boy or a non-Jew who has absolutely no plans for circumcision whatsoever. Both can call Abraham Father, if, like Abraham, both depend by faith on God's grace for inclusion into the family. Abraham is the father of the circumcised and the uncircumcised because of this concept: covenant requirements follow after covenant acceptance.

**Concept #2: God's promise is secured by God's grace (4:13-17).**

We are going to see this in Romans 4:13-17. It is a point that we have already been making. When look at the covenant ceremony of Genesis 15, the faith of Abraham is placed in the center of the dialogue, in the center of the chapter. So, we get God and Abraham talking and later we get God and Abraham talking, but right in the middle of all that it says his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness. Faith is in the center of that covenant moment in Genesis 15, but grace is the anchor, that covenant moment of God walking through those animals and declaring, with Abraham asleep, and God saying, "If you break covenant with me, then let me die." That idea of grace is the anchor. It is not the strength of the faith that counts, but the strength of the one who is offering the gift. We need to pay close attention to Paul's language here, because he introduces a concept that is going to come back several times through the letter. So, as we get ready to read these next few verses, let's pay attention. Let's not miss it. We are going to read Romans 4:13-17, and also notice the repetition of the word promise. This is why we are calling Abraham's covenant the covenant of Promise. So, here we go, 4:13-17.

[Read Romans 4:13-17]

Alright. Let's go through that again and take it verse by verse. And point out some things.

"<sup>13</sup> For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith."

I think by now we've got that. The promise is not on the basis of living up to the law, but on a declaration of righteousness that comes by faith. Paul goes on to make a really strong statement we need to pay attention to.

"<sup>14</sup> For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified;"

This is strong. It is not just that faith is a good idea, but if the promise was a covenant of law, some kind of religious contract, then the promise would be nullified. Paul's turning this language around from the original question. The original objection was that faith nullifies the law. Paul says, "No, no. If you think the law was the basis of covenant, then by law you have actually nullified the promise." Faith does not nullify law. Law nullifies promise if you misunderstand law. What do you mean Paul? How so? What are you talking about?

"<sup>15</sup> for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation."

This is what we have been saying. If the promise depended on Abraham to live out the law of God, then at some point Abraham would have stumbled. In fact, he did stumble didn't he. Remember those two times he said, "Sarah is not my wife. She is my sister." Well, that was not a complete lie. She was his half-sister. But I cannot believe God approved of him allowing his wife, the mother of the covenant child, to be taken by Pharaoh and then again by Abimelech. Like any man Abraham stumbled. Abraham fell. And like any man, if forced to make a legal defense before God, Abraham would be judged guilty. "for the law brings wrath" on sinful men and all men sin, therefore the law always brings wrath.

So, consider the next part of the verse, verse 15. "but where there is no law, there also is no violation." This language is a little odd. Is there no law in the court of God? Are there no righteous requirements? That's not what this means by "no law." What this means is that when the standard of the law is not applied. If it is possible for us to approach the bench of God and ask, "God is there

some different way? If you judge me by law, I am dead. Is there no other way that I can be evaluated?" And if there is some other way, if there is some way that I can be evaluated other than by law, then there will be no violation of law taken into account. That is what this means that there is no violation. There is no violation if we are not even using law as a standard by which I am judged. And that is exactly what God has done for us. He allows us to make a defense based on grace. So we are not even going to consider the law. Not that the law is ignored but the law has been satisfied in Jesus Christ, which makes it possible, since he has already paid my penalty, it makes it possible for me to be evaluated not on the basis of law where there is going to be violation but on the basis of grace where law is not even taken into consideration. There is no violation, not because we have not violated righteous law, but because it is no longer a question of moral law. It now becomes a question of grace. And now verse 16,

*"<sup>16</sup> For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants,"*

The only way for God to make a promise with Abraham and his descendants and any human beings, for that matter, is for that promise to be based on grace received by faith. The strength of the promise is based on the giver of grace. We now simply receive the gift offered, or we reject the gift offered. That is the only way to guarantee the gift – the gift depends on God and not on us. And Paul goes on to repeat that the implication that if it is a gift offered by grace and received by faith, then it is available universally to all who would receive the gift. Continuing in verse 16,

*"not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham,"*

So, when he says "not to those who are of the Law" he does not mean those who are righteous because of the law. He means those who are seeking to fulfill the second question of covenant by law. So, those who are under Mosaic Law. And as they seek to live for God under law, the promise is guaranteed to them by faith, but also "to those who are of the faith of Abraham," who are not seeking to fulfill the covenant of Law,

*"who is the father of us all, <sup>17</sup> (as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, *even* God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist."*

This is concept #2. God's promise is secured by God's grace. Grace is God's side of the promise. The next concept Paul draws from Abraham looks at our side of the promise, the human side of the promise, which is faith. Let's read 4:18-21.

### **Concept #3: Faith is the assurance that God will perform what he has promised (4:18-21)**

[Read Romans 4:18-21]

Faith is the human correspondence to grace. We do not want to either overestimate or underestimate the nature of Abraham's faith. For Abraham to experience the reality of relationship with God, he had to trust that God would fulfill his promises. Paul describes that faith in verse 21. He says that Abraham, "being fully assured that what God had promised, he was also able to perform." That was the nature of Abraham's faith. He truly believed that God would fulfill the promises that God had made. That true belief was shown by choices and actions that Abraham made in his life. It is quite difficult to understand what someone means by saying, "I believe in God." when that belief does not change how he or she lives out their life. If you claim to have faith in God, and yet, your faith does not significantly impact your calendar or your wallet, then what does it even mean to say you have faith? James says the demons believe in God and shudder. We are not talking about some assent that God exists. Demons assent that God exists. Faith is more than mere belief. Faith is throwing in with God, stepping under his banner, trusting him in what he says is true and what he says he will do. Trust is show in action. You can say you trust that a chair will hold you up, but if you still refuse to sit in it, your words contradict the reality of your heart. You might be saying, "I trust."

But your actions are saying, “I do not trust.” Our inner faith, if we really trust God, that is going to compel us to action at different points in our life.

You can ask yourself that question, “What life decisions have I made or what life decisions am I making that would cause a neighbor or family member or co-worker to say, “What in the world are you doing? Why would you do that?” And you say, “I think it’s what God wants me to do?” And they say, “You can’t know that.” And then you just shrug because you don’t really have anything else to say, because you are really trusting God. Whether it is rational or not, it makes sense to you, because you think this is what God wants you to do. You are basing it on his promises, and that’s it.

What’s an example of that? I don’t know. We could think of all kinds of examples. It could be your refusing to do something questionable at work even if it might get you in trouble or get you fired. Maybe it’s a change of jobs. Or you decided to homeschool your kids. Or you are going on a mission trip. You decide to buy somebody a car. You regularly visit the neighbor no one can stand. You read your Bible every day before work. You volunteer. You enjoy worship. You put your money where your mouth is and you make space in your calendar. If you really believe that God is king of all, that he is holy, that he loves you, that he promises to care for you and keep you and make you a blessing, then how can there not be an effect on the way you live life? True faith is trust in God, and real trust in God produces life change or produces life action.

What did it look like for Abraham? So, let’s notice first two things. We are looking at this moment. It says Abraham was 100 years old. And he “did not waver in respect to the promise.” I think we are talking about right at this moment when God said, “You are going to have a child and it is going to be through Sarah,” that Abraham did not waver. But that not wavering is a characteristic I think we see through Abraham’s life. I am going to have to defend that, because it certainly looks sometimes like he is wavering. I think he did not waver in respect to the promise. But there is something else that is being said here, and that is that he “grew strong in faith.” And if I am right that Abraham didn’t waver in his belief that God was going to fulfill his promise, then it is also right to say, “but he was weak in faith at some point, because here he grows strong in faith and that implies he was weaker in order to be able to grow stronger.” Even if he is able to have a consistency in his faith from the first moment of receiving the promise, there is still a process of growth. I think Paul is giving us a lens here by which we can look at life of Abraham. We could interpret his actions in a variety of ways. That is a problem of biblical narrative. You look at what people do and say, and their struggles, and their sin and you wonder, or we talking about a Saul who struggled, but didn’t seem to have a heart for God at all, or are we talking about a David who really struggled, but he really inside had a heart for God. Paul is giving us a lens for Abraham’s narrative that he really had faith, even though there were moments of struggle. And he grew strong in that faith, unwavering, but in need of growth.

Something real had clicked in Abraham’s soul. We are not sure about his family to be honest. He does go to them to get a wife for Isaac and they know who Yahweh is. But Joshua, at the end of his book, he also lets us know that Abraham’s family back up there by the river, by the Euphrates, they worshipped gods beyond the river, and that means they worshipped the gods of Mesopotamia. Sounds like there was some good and bad going on. There was a little mixing of true worship and culture. There was a cultural-ness to his family background. But for him, something clicked in his soul. He heard God. He believed God. And because he believed God, because he had true faith, he picked up his family and he moved. His trust in God caused him or compelled him to action that made a difference in his life.

I mean, God had given him a great news. We have to be honest about that. “I am going to bless you with provision, with protection and purpose, with land, with children. That’s a great gospel for anybody. But the gospel’s great in Jesus when we first give it. All you have to do is receive it by faith, and then you are in the family of God. And God is going to protect you and make you into who you were created to be. And you are going to live with him forever. That is awesome. And yet, how many people say, “No. No thank you. I like my life that way it is. Thanks, but no thanks.” Abraham did not



say, “Thanks, but no thanks.” Abraham said, “Yes sir. Thank you so much. I trust you. I believe you are going to follow through on your word. And so, I am following you.” I can only imagine what his family thought when he tried to explain to them that God told him to move down south and that Sarah, his old lady, was going to have children. I see them smiling. They are all smiling and standing there waving at him as he goes off, and they are whispering to each other, “That boy ain’t right. Religion’s gone to his head. It’s fine to believe in God, so long as it don’t change nothin’. But, bye now. Y’all come back.”

Abraham heads on, because Abraham believed God and that faith really did not waiver through the whole story of his life. Or did it? I said I was going to have to prove this. There are high moments. Abraham trusted God to show him where to settle. Abraham braved a rescue mission. He went and fought and brought Lot back when he had been captured. Abraham, unlike Lot, avoided Sodom and Gomorrah. He let God lead him in the land. But he did compassionately argue on their behalf. So, he has some high moments. But on the other hand, we already mentioned he lied about Sarah, twice, putting her in two very compromising situations with foreign rulers. He questioned God during that covenant cutting ceremony moment, “How can I believe God I am going to have children? How can I believe God I am going to have land?” He gave in to Sarah’s suggestion that he have a child with her maidservant. So, what does that mean if it does not mean that he wavered?

We notice these things in Abraham’s life. Where ever he went, he built altars. So, he arrives in the promise land, and he builds an altar and he praises Yahweh. Then he goes down to Egypt, and he comes back. He builds an altar and he prays to Yahweh. He has got this consistent worship of Yahweh. Another thing we notice is that Abraham always responds positively to the direct word of God. When God says something Abraham is like, “Yes, sir! I trust you. I am doing it. This is good. Let’s go with it.” When he understood what God wanted clearly, he did it. Abraham was basing his life on the promises of God, but in reality, he was often confused about how it ought to be worked out. And sometimes he was afraid. Maybe he was lustful. Maybe he was impatient. So, he is helping God out with the promise, both because of his confusion and also because of the sin of his heart.

At times that means it looks like he does not really believe. I think the reality is that he did, but even in his belief, he was overcome by his flesh. Doubting is a reality in the life of people who truly believe. Abraham always came back to the central truth that God is real, God has made a promise, God always keeps his promises. And that affected how Abraham lived his life.

So, our fourth covenant moment in Abraham’s life comes almost at the very end. It is in Genesis 22. And it is about 35 years after God gave Abraham the promise. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. I am convinced that God never, ever would have asked the Abraham of Genesis 12 to sacrifice his son. That Abraham had true faith. But he did not know God that well. And he did not know himself that well. His faith was fresh and young. That is very positive, but it was also naïve and weak. He would have thought that God was asking for a human sacrifice. He did not know God that well. He knew the culture. And he would have thought, “This is what people do. If you really want to please God, and he has made this promise. And I really want to show God I believe he is going to give me descendants. I am going to sacrifice my first born. I am going to kill my first born and give him up to this god, so this god will really want to bless me.”

He could not have understood in Genesis 12 what he understood 35 years later with such strong conviction. Thirty-five years later, he knew that the promised child is the one who comes from me and Sarah and that his name is Isaac. And that from Isaac, nations are going to come. And God always keeps his promise. Therefore, Isaac must live. Whether that is rational or not, no matter what God is saying, Abraham knows that God keeps his promise. And the promise was through Isaac. He knows that now. Through his failures and successes, he has grown strong in faith. We get a little help from the writer to the Hebrews in chapter 11, he tells us what Abraham believed, that Abraham believed that even if it was necessary to go through with the sacrificing Isaac that God would raise him back from the dead. He told his servants, “You guys wait here until the boy and I return.” He was serious

about that. He really believed he was coming off that mountain with Isaac. That does not mean that it was not hard to go up the mountain. He was still having to trust God. But his trust gave him this real assurance and this conviction that he was coming down. And it is not trust he would have had 35 years ago. But he had grown strong. And he was convinced.

He did not waver through his many years with God in his faith, but he did need to grow. Through that growth he was now ready to experience a much greater trial. It is one that God knows he is going to pass. What God is doing here is that God is inviting this more mature believer up into his own heart, so that Abraham can experience briefly and incompletely what God would be going to experience fully. When God walked through those sacrificial pieces in Genesis 15, God was making this great amazing statement, "If you break covenant let me die." At that moment, Abraham, if he understood, he could receive it with joy, but he does not feel what God feels. You know that is a moment of pain and joy for God. But here God is giving Abraham an opportunity to experience both the pain and joy of offering up your son. And Abraham is not actually going to have to go through it. It is one more remainder to Abraham that he and his seed deserve the wrath of God for their sin. They deserve to die. But a ram was given in their place. God gave Abraham this symbolic substitute in anticipation of the day when God really would go through giving up his own son as a true substitute.

There is a significant difference there in that Jesus is also fully God. So, it is not God choosing for his son without his son having a say. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit have made a plan of love where the Son is going to willingly, just as the Father offers the Son willingly himself. And Abraham just barely got to taste what that would be like in the heart of a father to have to willingly give his son in the place of another.

This was a covenant test. And Abraham passed. The test did not make Abraham worthy of God. The test showed Abraham's faith to be true. It was a moment that helped Abraham himself to see that, "Wow. I really believe." That is often the result of our trials. We pass through the trial and it is not that God needs to see we have true faith. God knows we have true faith. But it helps us to see that we have true faith. It is like ore when it is passed through the intense fire, and the fire shows, in the case of Abraham, that that ore is true gold. When he passed through the fire, his faith was shown real.

True faith means something has clicked at the core of our being. We know that God is real. We know that God is good. We know that we should base our life on his word. But there is still the reality that we struggle and fail. We let fear override what we know to be true, like Abraham did. Or we help God out without asking God how we should help him out. We just make our own strategies and bulldoze ahead. We just maybe don't talk to God for a while, because we do not want him to interfere with the plan. And hopefully we are growing from those failures. Hopefully we do not waiver in the belief that God is real, and God is good and that our life is in his hands. If you have true faith, you have got that down in the core of your soul. You know he is good. You know he has got you.

Abraham is our model. This is the human side of the covenant relationship. God's side is grace. He offers us grace. And we receive it by faith. And faith is this belief that God will do what God promises he will do.

I want to finish with the fourth concept real briefly, so let me just run through these four concepts that we get here in this second part of chapter 4.

**Concept #4: The promise to Abraham set the precedent for the gospel of Jesus Christ (4:22-25).**

Concept #1: Covenant requirements follow covenant acceptance. Circumcision, baptism, whatever God tells us to do under the second question of covenant, that follows the acceptance we have in the first question of covenant. Covenant requirements follow after covenant acceptance.

Concept #2: God's promise depends on God's grace. God's promise does not depend on your ability to keep the covenant requirements. And it does not depend on the strength of your faith.

Your faith does not make God's promise secure. God's grace and his strength to do what he said he was going to do, that is what makes it secure. And your faith, even if it is small as a mustard seed, if it so weak, but you do belief then you are safe. But concept #3, that faith does need to be real. Even if it is weak, and you are often confused, and you have fear and are still struggling with trying to grow in your faith, faith does need to be real. There is some real reception of grace.

Concept #3: Faith is the belief that God will perform what he has promised.

Concept #4: The promise to Abraham set the precedent for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Just as it was for Abraham, so also it is for us in Jesus. So that is how we will wrap up. This whole chapter has focused on that one verse that Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. We have been developing that. And God has been drawing out these concepts based on that idea. So, let's sum up how Abraham has been a precedent for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let's just read the text. It is Romans 4:22-25.

[Read Romans 4:22-25]

## Reflection Questions

1. What two or three observations stand out to you in verses 9-25 as particularly interesting, important, confusing, or strange? Record your observations either as a statement or as a question. (Questions are a great way to record observations: Why did Paul say that? What did Paul mean by that? Who is affected by that? How does that work? And so on.)

2. What did God accomplish in the life of Abraham and in our theological understanding of covenant by allowing so much time to pass between each of the four major covenant moments in Abraham's life? (The years are close approximations.)

Covenant promise      A      Covenant ceremony      B      Covenant sign      C      Covenant test  
Genesis 12      10 yrs      Genesis 15      13 yrs      Genesis 17      12 yrs      Genesis 22

What can be significantly learned by the passage of time between covenant promise and covenant ceremony (A); between covenant ceremony and covenant sign (B); and between covenant sign and covenant test (C)?

3. Express in your own words Paul's point in verse 14-15, "For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation."

4. What does Paul mean by saying that Abraham "did not waiver in unbelief?" What moment is Paul describing in Abraham's life.

5. You might disagree with Michael who says that Abraham did not waiver in his faith through his life. If Abraham did waiver, when would you say he waived and how would you define that?

6. What are moments of faith growth you see in Abraham's life?

7. What are a couple of faith tests or faith growth moments that you experience in your life? When have you passed through the fire to realize on the other side, "Wow. I really do trust God!"

8. In the end, how does Paul's example of Abraham support his point from 3:31 that faith fulfills the law? (Would you make a distinction in your answer regarding how faith fulfills the law with respect to the first question of covenant and how it fulfills the law in regard to the second question of covenant? If you are not sure about the second question of covenant answer that is fine. Paul tackles the second question of covenant in chapters 5-8. For now, you should focus on answering how faith fulfills the law in respect to the first question of covenant.)